VERMONT
AGENCY OF EDUCATION

FAQ: What is the Common Core and why did Vermont adopt it?

by Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary of Education

What is the Common Core?

The Common Core is an aspirational document, one in a series of standards documents that seek to describe what all students should know and be able to do in order to thrive in college and careers in the 21st century. Some students may strive beyond it; others may struggle to achieve it. It is not a curriculum; curriculum is a local responsibility, and many of our districts are already far along in this process and beginning to see results.

In the Common Core is a shift to a focus on developing such qualities as logical thinking and reasoning from evidence and effective communication—qualities that prepare students for the complex work they will encounter when they grapple with problems in the work force or college. Some of what Vermonters think of as critical outcomes for our children are described in the Common Core, while there are many other outcomes many feel are essential that are not captured or given high profile in the Core, including history and civics, the arts and scientific inquiry. However, because the Common Core defines a common set of "core" goals for our children in math and English language arts, it is a powerful tool for bringing teachers together to talk about what good teaching is and what good learning looks like.

The standards in the Common Core are statements that describe what students are expected to know and be able to do at different points in their school career in mathematics and English language arts (ELA). For example, here are two sample 8th grade standards:

English Language Arts Standards » Grade 8 » 1
Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Mathematics » Investigate patterns of association in bivariate data. » 1
Construct and interpret scatter plots for bivariate measurement data to investigate patterns of association between two quantities. Describe patterns such as clustering, outliers, positive or negative association, linear association, and nonlinear association.

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers (2010) Common Core State Standards. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington D.C.

http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) offer focus and coherence to the work in schools, so that all learning builds consistently towards shared goals. Again, decisions about curricula and the right intervention for any given child at any given moment are rightly left to educators in the field. Some teachers may seek to be more ambitious than the Common Core. Some will be gifted at personalizing and at teaching to ambitious goals through a variety of applied contexts, including in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. What we ask is that good teachers do what they have always done: set high goals for **all** students, use their judgment to decide how to best help all students achieve those goals, and then use all available data to track growth and make strategic decisions about how to best support each learner.

Why new standards?

It is not that teachers and schools are not doing a good job, but rather that the world our children are entering has changed in fundamental ways, and thus what students need to learn has changed. The jobs that compensate will increasingly be jobs that depend on our children's ability to solve non-routine problems and make sense of new information. When you go to many stores now or buy your gas, you can check out on a machine. In an airport, you get your boarding pass from a kiosk. There are prototype dairies where machines with sensors milk cows, tend them and monitor their well-being, while a "farmer" manages the processes remotely on a computer. Many of the jobs our children used to do are now done by machines, so we need to educate our children to do the work that is uniquely human.

The unique power of our children's minds is in their flexibility and ability to learn, and this is what we need to develop. For example, our students need to be able to comprehend complicated information, reason from evidence, and be able to solve complex and non-routine problems. One goal of the Common Core is to ensure that our students have opportunities to develop the kinds of analytical reasoning and problem solving skills they need to be able to thrive in the future and do the jobs computers cannot do.

What do we expect teachers to do with the Common Core?

We expect our teachers to do what good teachers have always done: review the standards, understand the purpose behind some of the changes implied by the standards, and assess how well their own teaching and curriculum are aligned with the purpose of the Common Core. We also expect teachers to share their work and the work of their students with other teachers, to look for evidence of their effectiveness in student work, and to make professional decisions about how to improve their teaching and better support and challenge their students towards ambitious intellectual and work goals.

Does the Common Core mean all students should be doing the same thing, every day? Of course not. One example: some children enter kindergarten able to read, while some others have never seen a book and so don't understand basic concepts of print, including that symbols are associated with sounds or that stories have beginnings, middles and ends. Most importantly, some students may not understand that books can give pleasure and are tools for learning about the topics that interest you, so they may not bring with them an intrinsic motivation to

learn to read. Children who read and children who are unfamiliar with books need fundamentally different kinds of opportunities to learn in kindergarten regardless of what is in the Common Core, and our best teachers already know this and focus on what each individual child needs to learn in order to move to the next step in his or her learning.

While we hold the same ambitious goals for all students, we understand different students need to walk different paths to get to those goals, and support local flexibility in deciding how to help students reach those goals. The Governor's initiative to expand access to high quality preschool is a strong step towards ensuring that all of our youngest, most vulnerable citizens have the kinds of opportunities they need to embrace school and thrive when they arrive. At the other end of our school system, the personal learning plans and flexible pathways ensure that teachers have opportunities to work closely with students to individualize and personalize their learning, so that each student is challenged to develop his or her capacity to reason from evidence, solve ill-structured problems that may have more than one solution or no obvious solution, and communicate effectively.

We believe we can do a better job statewide at ensuring ALL children have high quality instruction that moves them towards our goals. One lesson of recent research on the brain is that the actual structure of the brain is reshaped by the kinds of teaching and the environments students' experience. We used to think of potential as somewhat fixed, but more recent research in neuroscience suggests that teachers and parents are literally sculptors of the brain, and what we think of as "intelligence" changes through instruction and effort. As teachers and parents, we need to help foster a learning mindset in our students, so that students see the connection between practice and performance. We need to develop school cultures in which students feel safe taking risks and making the "mistakes" that are necessary parts of deep learning. And, we need to consistently challenge and support ALL students to develop greater capability as they move through our schools. To ensure all students develop higher levels of capabilities, we need to perseverate less on how they score currently, and more on how much growth we are able to foster and help them sustain. This work has to be done by skilled professionals making informed judgments at the local level.

Does the Common Core define everything we think it is important for our students to know and be able to do?

No. We need to balance our use of the Common Core with the understanding that although the goals it lays out are aspirational, it by no means covers the entirety of our goals for our children. Vermonters also care about civics and history, the arts, wellness, scientific thinking, students' ability to participate effectively in a democracy, and students' ability to apply what they learn to real world, dynamic problems. Most of these goals are not captured in the Common Core, and attention to the Common Core should not displace these other critical priorities. The breadth of these goals should give us respect for the complexity of the challenges teachers face.

We expect teachers will teach in ways that address other essential outcomes, including a love of learning, the ability to participate effectively in civic life, the ability to self-regulate and manage one's progress towards goals, the ability to engage in sustained and systematic inquiry, and

appreciation of and the ability to express oneself through the arts. The Vermont Agency of Education (VT-AOE) will be supporting initiatives around personal learning plans and performance assessments of essential outcomes that will give students multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery over and beyond the Common Core.

But what about those tests?

When people express concerns to me about the Common Core, what I often learn, through some conversation, is that what really concerns them is how scores on standardized tests will be used and what impact these uses will have on learning and the culture of their schools. We look forward to working with our stakeholders to review the research literature on appropriate and inappropriate uses of test scores, and to having vigorous and honest discussions around how we can use test scores to support schools in their efforts to improve teaching practice and the learning of all students, including those who need our support the most.

For context, under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, basically all our schools are considered "failing," even as a report from the US Department of Education ranks our schools seventh *in the world* on science and math, compared to all states and nations. How are we supposed to make sense of these kinds of rankings and judgments and use them in any meaningful way to improve learning for our children?

The Common Core exists separately from the tests, and from the subjective judgments that will be made about what level of performance constitutes "proficiency" on the tests. Nationally, there are a number of tests that have been developed to sample the kind of learning described in the Core. Vermont has elected to use the Smarter Balanced (SBAC) Assessment. We feel it is a substantial improvement on the former New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) tests and will give our teachers much more reliable and accurate information (see our website for more information about the Smarter Balanced Assessment: http://education.vermont.gov/sbac). We believe good tests are a useful tool for taking stock of how our children are doing and whether our efforts to improve are having an effect. That said, we don't control the uses of the test that are required by Federal Policy, including some use that we feel are very problematic in the VT context.

Some of these concerns are based in evidence. There is now substantial research documenting the fact that attaching high stakes to test scores causes a host of potential ills, from narrowing of instruction away from untested subjects to tested subjects, and even to the specific format of items used on tests. As economist Henry Levin wrote:

> "....the breadth of the new standards is countered by the narrowness of testing and assessment and the absence of consideration of the non-cognitive dimensions, which are also ingredients of adaptability. Increasing the educational attainment of the labor force and maintaining and expanding its adaptability ought to be the top two educational priorities for meeting workplace requirements in the middle of the 21st century. This cannot be done without creating greater balance and interaction in the educational system among the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal goals. The single-minded

focus on narrowly measured student achievement may be the greatest obstacle to creating the productive labor force of the future (2012)."

There are also studies in some states with very high stakes that compare gains in student scores on high stakes tests to gains on the National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP), which show that gains on state tests are not mirrored on the National Assessment of learning in the same subject. This raises questions about what gains mean under high stakes conditions, if whatever helped students do better on the state tests didn't help them do better on other tests of the same subject.

Vermont declined to apply for a waiver under the Federal No Child Left Behind policy, because in order to do so, we would have had to evaluate teachers and fire principals based on the scores of their students. However, the best available research suggests these scores are unreliable and often inaccurate in small class sizes, so that if we attached sanctions to scores, we might end up sanctioning the wrong people because our measure was bad. In fact, one recent study threw classes of 15 or fewer students out of the study sample, because results for those classes were too unreliable and were distorting the findings. We estimate that 40-50% of our classes across the state have 15 or fewer students. See: Daniel F. McCaffrey, Tim R. Sass, J. R. Lockwood, and Kata Mihaly (2009) The Intertemporal Variability of Teacher Effect Estimates. Education Finance and Policy. Vol. 4, No. 4, Pages 572-606, P. 572-606. For a freely available, early version of this paper, see: http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/news/events/vam%20conference%20final%20papers/intertemporalstability_mccaffreysasslockwood.pdf

The VT-AOE will continue to support the use of testing for appropriate purposes, including:

- Federal reporting
- To set realistic targets for improvement
- To use as a trigger for more detailed evaluation of schools, either to learn what schools might be doing very effectively or to help identify strategies schools can use to get better
- To audit gains when possible
- To help recognize when schools appear to be making gains with their students

We do not endorse using test scores for what research shows and we see as inappropriate uses, including:

- To compare performance across subjects or across grade levels
- To sanction individual teachers or as a single measure of school quality (for any consequential purpose)

We will comply with federal requirements with respect to Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and identification of schools as necessary, but we do not endorse these purposes. We think the fact that federal policy considers all our schools "failing," even as the USDOE "ranks" us 7th in the world in math and science speaks for itself: federal policy on accountability is broken and dysfunctional. We will continue on the assumption that all schools can and should do better for all kids, and focus on supporting our schools as they work to provide better supports for students, improve teaching practice and personalize learning, all with the goal of improving learning.